

THE CATHOLIC TRADITION AT THE BEGINNINGS OF HUNGARIAN PSYCHOLOGY: HARKAI, DIENES, SCHÜTZ*

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The paper surveys the different attitudes and oeuvres in early twentieth-century Catholic psychology in Hungary. Some authors like Gyula Kornis tried to introduce experimental psychology into the Catholic intellectual panorama, while avoiding any open conflicts between faith and science. Others like Antal Schutz tried to combine their interest towards psychology with a clear anti-positivist credo and went back to Tomistic notions regarding the integrity of personality. Still others like Paul von Schiller became leading experimental scientists in whose work the Catholic element is revealed by his interest in animal intentionality. On the whole, Catholic psychology in the Hungarian context has many faces but also some underlying common features such as anti-elementarism and an interest in the active aspects of mental life.

Keywords: Catholic psychology, functionalism, Tomist philosophy, modern logics, evolution of mind

Varieties of “Catholic psychology” and the Hungarian scene

The aim of this article is neither a detailed analysis of the Catholic tradition of psychology in Hungary, nor a detailed analysis of how the works mentioned here are related to the integral history of Hungarian psychology. My point is that Hungarian researchers with a Catholic background, or who were Catholic believers and joined the freshly started psychology movement of the first third of the twentieth century, did not advocate a single version of a so-called “Catholic psychol-

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ogy”, but approached the question of scientific psychology in different ways. I will only touch upon a few selected biographies here. The choices are not random. The researchers selected as well as their work represent a typical attitude, even in the context of international psychology. This brief article also has a certain aim to popularize the Hungarian Catholic tradition of psychology, since it has almost completely faded out of international consciousness. Such excellent surveys as that of Misiak and Staudt (1954) or Sexton and Misiak (1966) know nothing about us or the authors presented here.

At the beginning of the twentieth century one could find different varieties of Catholic writers and different interactions between psychology and Catholicism. These varieties were undoubtedly connected to the duality of the reform and the conservative movements within the Catholic Church itself. One variety of the relations between psychology and Catholicism is rooted in a certain fear of science. In particular, Catholicism is frightened by the fact that the human mind or “soul” can be a subject of scientific analysis and the church tries to protect a traditional mentality – the concept of soul – and armchair philosophical psychology along with the misleading vision of category-based omniscience. All of this is entertained as a “reactionary move” against scientific analysis and a supposed materialist degradation of the human soul. This *fear reaction* was present in Hungarian psychology as well. Even in the last years of the nineteenth century, the monograph of Gyula Kozáry (1898) for example opposed traditions of the then recent past – scolded by positivism and reductionism – with substantial concepts of the soul. It is important to see, however, that along with this *fear reaction* there were certain other attempts that essentially tried to revitalize a particular *veritas duplex* in the every day practice of scientific thinking; that is to bring into some kind of harmony between science and belief – a science of the mind that referred to a crucial part of their faith, the belief in the soul. These attempts at non-radical modernization worked without direct communication between science and faith. Gyula (Julius) Kornis, with whom I want to deal only very briefly in this article, was a characteristic representative of this trend. Kornis (1917) in his summary of psychology, a work of some 1300 pages, did not even talk about the relationship between the problems of religious theses on the soul and modern analytic experimental psychology. No doubt, he was rather attracted towards *mental science* (*Geistwissenschaftliches*) psychology, in accordance with certain doctrines of the soul. However, while presenting experimental psychology there is no public communication between his well-known Catholicism and a new, psychological attitude that questions traditional ideas.

Different Catholic attempts appeared within the framework of this atmosphere of modernization in Hungary as well as in international psychology at large to interpret modern psychology. There are three basic attempts that can be observed in contemporary European psychology, and all three are present in Hungary as well

- that is exactly the point of my paper – and all three have an effect on psychology even today.
- Connections between modern functionalism and Aristotelian ideas. Many discover problems with the Cartesian tradition and point out the similarities of a Tomist-Aristotelian attitude and modern functionalist psychology.
- Soft intentionality: the connection of *Denkpsychologie* (the theory of cognition of the Würzburg school) and the program of modern psychology developed by Brentano (1874). The integrating moment is the idea that the definitive characteristics of mental phenomena are not to be looked for in their lack of bodily content but in their reference to objects, these latter ones being either external or mental.
- Practical functionalism: participation in educational reforms and the shaping of a child-centered education alternative.

The functionalism of Paul (Harkai) Schiller

The works of Harkai are not directly or strictly linked to the Catholic tradition of psychology. However, he played a central role in Hungary by forming an early version of a theory that connected Aristotelian functionalism and experimental psychology. In this regard one can consider his work a particular Catholic development, beyond the biographical fact that he formulated ideas deeply embedded in Catholic spiritual and intellectual life. As the careful analysis of both Magda Marton (1998) and Dewsbury (1994a,b, 1996) clearly showed, Harkai was a groundbreaking researcher, who enjoyed an international status in his attempts to connect comparative psychological thought with a semiotic and Gestalt based notion of behavioral organization. This comprehensive attitude also appeared in his experimental works that were pivotal in the investigation of mammal and primate behavioral organization in issues such as the analysis of detour behavior, early indicators of visual sign use in chimpanzees, Gestalt integration and the like (Schiller 1950, 1951, 1952).

His one and a half decade long work in Hungary in a historical sense was crucial in establishing experimental psychology at the Faculty of Arts at Pázmány University in Budapest. (See about this broader framework in Pléh 1997.) This attitude tried to combine epistemological philosophical issues with the experimental methodology of natural sciences and is in line with one of the main hybridization movements underlying modern psychology (Ben-David and Collins 1966). By establishing the experimental tradition at the faculty of arts, Harkai has become the founder of a tradition of psychology in Hungary that has continued to be until today one of the most basic traditions.

In respect to the issue of Catholic traditions, there are two important features of his work. I emphasize them here without questioning his preeminence as an experimenter and his role in comparative psychology. The first peculiar feature of his work is an empirically and theoretically motivated renewal of Aristotelian functionalism. For Harkai the task of psychology (*The Task of Psychology*, 1940/2002, modified German version Schiller 1947) is connected to the problem of the traditional Cartesian dualism, the postulation of a “multi-level man”, a vision that supposes the reality of a mental world on the same level of abstraction as physiological processes. Harkai juxtaposes with this image a view of biological man, which is in fact the renewal of an Aristotelian thought, by proposing that body and soul, physiology and psychology, are not two different levels. Mental phenomena are a particular organization of human bodily or physiological processes. This curious functionalism links him in the history of Catholic psychology to the works of Mercier (1897/1926), a Belgian Neotomist “modernizer”, who – well aware of the facts of experimental psychology of the time – advocated the unity of body and mind. Mercier contrasted this view with that of Wundt who basically defended Cartesian dualism in a very curious modern setting. For Harkai it was also pivotal that there be a continuity between Cartesian dualism and the ideas of Wundt (1903). In his theoretical work he interprets the “heuristic principle of psychophysical parallelism”, an important methodological doctrine for the followers of Wundt, as the continuation of ontological Cartesian dualism. According to Harkai, the main problem of Wundt – and this leads us beyond Aristotelian thoughts into a wider functionalist framework – is that he is unable to deal with the problem of “fields”, popularized by Gestalt psychologists and other action oriented theorists of Harkai’s time, the environmental forces that determine behavioral and mental processes. The organization of behavior should be interpreted as the interaction of the environment and a unified biological organismic entity. The motivational system of organisms only makes sense in an evolutionary background and cannot be interpreted merely as an interaction of experience and physiological processes.

This gives a curious flavor to the views of Harkai on the *unity of psychology*. For him the key to unity is that one has to consider the actions in animal behavior, their motivational aspects, the direction of mental processes (their intentionality) and their unified organization. According to Harkai the inspiration for this psychology should come from the followers of the intentionality tradition initiated by Brentano (1874). Another source for talking about the semiotic unity of psychology, claiming that all human or animal action is characterized by a goal and at the same time it is guided by certain signals, is Karl Bühler (1927). All actions are goal-oriented, as the purposive behaviorism of Tolman (1932) claimed as well. At the same time behavior has an objective reference and is organized as a whole. This is what Bühler and Harkai thought to be the right attempt to overcome the

contradictions of the fragmentation of the field of contemporary psychology, which included motivation-centered psychoanalysts, cognition-centered experimenters, and overt action-centered behaviorists. These all should unite in a goal-centered holistic experimental psychology.

The work of Harkai was a modern attempt at a synthesis, and as such it is proudly considered a valuable Hungarian tradition by the cognitive science community (see: Pléh 1997). Its value is enhanced by the fact that it not only concentrates on experimental data, but also connects the renewal of Aristotelian functionalism with the efforts of complex analyses of animal behavior. It is important to emphasize this because one part of the functionalism of cognitive science, machine functionalism that was started in the sixties by Putnam (1960) and Fodor (1968) does not see quite so clearly the continuity between evolutionary functionalism (started at the end of the nineteenth century) and the new machine-based Aristotelian explanation. For some of the cognitive scientists one important part of functionalism is computational liberalism: the belief that different kinds of organisms might have mental organizations, and this does not exclude machines either. These cognitive scientists are not particularly interested in the problems so crucial for the European functionalist and the American pragmatist tradition, such as the question of organizational levels of animal behavior or the biological interpretation of individual differences. Harkai is expressly a biological functionalist; in this sense he seems to form a contemporary parallel to Gilbert Ryle (1949/1998), who has been many times labeled a philosophical behaviorist. Ryle, when analyzing the categorical errors of Cartesian dualism, was trying to create a biological grounding of what we now call the philosophy of the mind. (Of course in his time due to the accepted behaviorist ideas this was not called a philosophy of mind.) Ryle was a lot softer and more open to the explanation of real biological processes than many of the hard cognitivists of today; and Harkai belongs to this expressly biological functionalist view.

A practical functionalist Catholic writer: Valéria Dienes (1879–1978)

Valéria Dienes is a particularly outstanding star of Hungarian intellectual life, who is a crucial reference point to those researching Hungarian philosophy history, pedagogy, Catholic intellectual life and spirituality, or even dance. I would only like to present here very sketchily some well-known facts about her life. (For a short summary of her activities see Pléh 1989, and for a description in German see the web-site of a school named after her in her home town of Szekszárd.) She was the first woman to receive a Doctor of Philosophy degree at Péter Pázmány University in Budapest; moreover she got this degree for her work in aesthetics

and mathematics. During her long life she was also a propagator of functional educational ideas, a Hungarian expert on Bergson. She was both a disciple of Bergson's and an insightful Bergson translator. (For the latter see Bergson 1923, 1930 with extensive essays on Bergson by Dienes.) She started a unique artistic dance movement, orchestics and in this way she became a disciple of Raymond Duncan, or even perhaps his re-interpreter, and at the same time a Catholic thinker searching for the emotional value of dancing.

It is also a well-known fact – as she herself describes it (Dienes 1983) – that in her early intellectual life she was attracted by a rather straightforward positivist and materialist belief and joined radical social and philosophical movements. This was followed by several intellectual turns in her philosophy, and in her approach to life. Her first source for a change of mind towards a more idealistic view of life was Bergson, whose idealism had a great effect on her philosophical and psychological views during the first decade of twentieth century. A second intellectual change came when after the turmoil of the revolutions following the First World War and in the midst of personal traumas as well Dienes returned to Catholicism, and from then on she continued her philosophical work in accordance with her Catholic faith.

From the point of view of the history of Hungarian psychology there are two moments that are interesting in her extraordinary career. The first one is her enthusiastic interpretation of Bergson (see Pléh 1989). In her works that are inspired by Bergson (Dienes 1923) she emphasized the importance of constructive processes of mental life and she introduced the concept of “internal movement”. For Dienes, Bergson is a philosopher, whose theory of remembering (Bergson 1896, 1991) and later works propose that the mental world is not merely a passive summation of sensory elements. The main function of the mind is the internal integrative process, a peculiar activity for constructing meaning that distinguishes us from helplessly passive beings. This is a crucial moment for Valéria Dienes, where one might find as a historian of psychology an intellectual connection between her Bergsonian ideas, her functionalist views and her later particular activist Catholicism. If we are to interpret her works from the point of view of Catholic tradition, according to her view the affinity between Catholicism and modern psychology comes from the fact that they do not subscribe to the postulation of a passive mind and a passive organism.

The second interesting aspect for psychology of the work of Dienes was her involvement in functionalist educational reform and its psychological underpinnings. With her translations (e.g. Binet 1916) and with her involvement in reform schools she helped the propagation of French educational functionalism at the beginning of the century in Hungary. As a translator of Binet (1916) she advocated the notion that the education of the child must spring from the interests and cognition of the child itself. The child as a particular self-evolving system has to help

the process of education and education should not merely be the infusion of ready-to-use knowledge systems into the mind of the child.

To understand the entire scale of her psychological ideas it is worth having a look at one of her survey works. In 1914 she published a particularly interesting brochure in the *Galilei-booklets*, a well-known progressive forum of left-wing ideas. This is an original synthesis that presents both Ivan Pavlov and the Würzburg school of the psychology of thought processes as the reformers of modern psychology. For Dienes the key feature is the emphasis on hidden factors and functions. By hidden factors she means that our mental life shows a number of organizational systems that are not directly apparent, they are not transparent to the self-studying conscious mind. Thinking is governed by hidden rules – so say the advocates of the Würzburg School – that we cannot get to know directly, only via their products, their mental outcomes. Pavlov on the other hand claimed according to Dienes that learning has certain automatic algorithms that are not directly transparent to consciousness either. In the survey of Valéria Dienes all this suggests a synthesis that presents psychology as the science of hidden organizing principles, where the emphasis is on organization; and all of this was proposed before the onset of Gestalt psychological ideas.

Catholic dogma and modern psychology: Antal (Anton) Schütz (1880–1953)

While in Hungarian psychology Harkai represents the accommodation of the experimental tradition at the faculty of arts and philosophy, and Dienes represents a functionalist tradition that is realized in educational movements, the uniqueness of Antal Schütz comes from his attempts to find practical relationships between Catholic belief and modern psychological ideas, a connection that Kornis for example leaves in the background. (For the life and activities of Schütz see his entry under the web sources.) In his youth Schütz obtained in addition to his theological degrees a doctoral degree in psychology in 1916 in Würzburg based on research that followed contemporary cognitive experimental psychology, or the Würzburg School. His dissertation was entitled *Zur Psychologie der bevorzugten Assoziation und des Denkens* (see Schütz 1942). He was investigating the hidden tendencies determining associative recall. It is relevant to remind the reader of three basic ideas of the Würzburg School:

- mental activities are guided by various non-image-like (*unanschauliches*) factors, such as attitudes;
- there are characteristic rules of individual cognition (thus logics is given a psychological interpretation);

- and all these factors should be interpreted by implying that mental activity is always directed outwards, it is characterized by intentionality.

This tradition originating from Brentano makes it possible for Schütz to connect Catholic ideas with the logic-based research of the Würzburg School.

Schütz finds his place at the university in Budapest not as a psychologist, but as a professor of Catholic dogmatics, which was in keeping with his first degree. As for the relationships between science and faith he represents the point of view that in the relationship of modern sciences (including psychology) and Catholic thought one should not try to reach a sort of dual validity, but rather we should always be guided by the principles of Catholic dogma, which always give us the right direction in scientific investigations of the mind. He tries to forge a unique alliance between Catholic dogma and a critical appraisal of contemporary psychology (Schütz 1944). His critical analysis of contemporary psychology is the sort of criticism that appears at the end of the twentieth century in the criticism of Ricoeur, which is in fact a combination of hermeneutics and Christian faith, criticizing today's neurobiology and psychology (see for example Changeux and Ricoeur 2000). But it is also recurrent in many non-professional and non-religious forms. For example, it is still a leading ideological criticism of experimental psychology in the works of Rom Harré (1989).

Schütz goes beyond merely criticizing experimental psychology for its simple mindedness. The work of Schütz represents quite well the special role of logical investigations in the Catholic psychological tradition and recalls the studies of Brentano.

The main point of the psychological ideas of Schütz is that scientific psychology (and this is very characteristic of his later writings mostly from the 1930s and 1940s, see Schütz 1941, 1944) has to be treated with great criticism. The solid basis of this criticism should be Catholic dogma, which consists primarily of a well-defined Thomistic interpretation of mental phenomena. This point of view has some messages for professional psychology as well. The main idea of Schütz – as it has been referred to before – is action theory of thinking, which asserted that the processes of thought – in accordance with the theory of the Würzburg School – cannot be regarded as mere sensory accumulation processes. The essential moment of thought comes from the subject's particular computations or acts. This dynamics of act – in line with the interpretation of dogmatic principles – is the key for him to avoid reductionism, to avoid reducing the mind to its elementary processes.

Schütz in his later works (1944) – in those parts that are a concern to psychology – made interesting detours to the depths pondered by the ideological critics of psychology. He considered positivism and evolutionary theory as barren and factually unattainable ideas. At the same time he feels a curious attraction towards

contemporary characterological movements. In one of his works, in his academic inauguration talk (Schütz 1941), he tried to elaborate connections between schools or streams in logics and personality types of the representative researchers. In the same way as one can distinguish different types of thinking in people, one can distinguish different types of thought among scientific trends as well. Logical atomism, for example, is connected to a typical analytic personality, while wholism in logics is similar to an integrative or unit-forming personality. In fact, it is a personal world view that appears in the disguise of logical schools, through the filtering effects of personality. This rather original proposal is rooted in Schütz's attempt for a synthesis of Aristotelian category studies and the analysis of the categories used to describe personality. Both of his proposals (first the personalistic interpretation of logical streams and the Aristotelian personality study) fit into his ideological view. For Schütz they supported his campaign against reductionistic psychology. In his view, only these synthetic ideas based on the integrity of personality will be able to create harmony between mind-guided Catholic ideas and modern psychology.

Summary

The presentation of these few Hungarian examples supports the conclusion of Sexton and Misiak (1966): there is no unified and unique "Catholic psychology" as such. The different streams that are present in Catholic intellectual life – both political and ideological streams – do find their place in the territory of Catholic psychology. According to this, in early Hungarian psychology there are various Catholic (or which can be categorized as Catholic) works that try to reach an agreement between Catholic modernization or the revision or emphasis of Catholic dogma and psychology. An important message behind these is the realization that there was not necessarily a contradiction between individual Catholic belief or even Catholic positions and the advocacy of modern psychology or even the acceptance of experimental psychology. In these different alternatives there are different personalities and values inside the Catholic group as well.

Yet, there are certain common factors between those conceptions that claim to be Catholic. It is difficult to imagine a Catholic psychology that should be straightforwardly empiricist and would believe that mental functioning is no more than the accumulation of elementary sensory crumbs. Aristotelian functionalism also seems to be an underlying common intellectual principle of twentieth-century Hungarian Catholic psychology; this sometimes appears as a program, at other times only as a secondary supposition. The importance of integrative factors of mental life is also one of the crucial points – this appears as signal-gestalts in the work of Harkai and the integrating role of personality in the works of Schütz.

Moreover they all share the belief that we have to find unity, both in the human personality and in the science of psychology, which should be a unified science. Another characteristic hidden principle – which is connected to the integrative idea – is the emphasis on action, the action part of mental processes and the supposition that mental life reaches beyond itself. This can be based on behavior, where one emphasizes the evolutionary idea of the continuity of human and animal behavior, as happens in the works of Harkai, but it can also be based on Catholic dogma. In a hidden way the reference to *another of* thoughts themselves can be considered the psychological variety of religious transcendency, as it is in the works of Schütz.

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